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Cllr Tim Valentine  
Cabinet Member for the Environment  
Swale Borough Council

Your ref: Cliff1  
Our ref: TO2021/09149

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3 February 2022

Dear Cllr Valentine,

Thank you for your letter of 26 January 2021 to the Secretary of State about coastal erosion in the Isle of Sheppey. Please accept our sincere apologies for the considerable delay in responding. Defra is currently dealing with high volumes of correspondence.

Shoreline management plans (SMPs) are developed by Coastal Groups with members mainly from local councils and the Environment Agency. They identify the most sustainable approach to managing the flood and coastal erosion risks to the coastline in the:

- short-term (0 to 20 years).
- medium term (20 to 50 years).
- long term (50 to 100 years).

The policy options set out in the Isle of Grain to South Foreland SMP were all adopted by the relevant operating authorities in the first half of 2008. These include Swale Borough Council, which was involved in developing and adopting the SMP policy of No Active Intervention. Whilst this was developed in line with Defra guidance, including HM Treasury rules on economics, it is not a Government policy.

In this particular situation, the SMP policy was agreed as the most sustainable policy for a number of reasons, namely:

- It covers an area of geological SSSI which is an important feature and would be harmed by the introduction of defences.
- The sediment released from cliff erosion in this area is an important source of sediment for other areas along the coastline. This protects other communities and internationally protected sites in the wider estuary.
- The funding of flood defences is governed by HM Treasury rules based on protecting people and property. The protection of isolated properties and caravan parks in this location is challenging to justify under the current economic rules. This is a challenge shared by many locations around the coast of England.
- The nature of the risk in this area is one of land slip compounded by erosion. This is a particularly challenging combination to deal with and indeed a scheme implemented in 2015 by Swale Borough Council proved ineffective.

The SMP documents are living documents and the SMP policy can be changed in some cases, where new evidence is available. To do this the SMP change process highlighted in the updated supplementary SMP guidance must be followed. This enables all parties involved to respond to these concerns and requires final approval from the Environment Agency. To initiate this process, Swale Borough Council should refer the issue to the SMP Governance group via the Coastal Group Chair, Bryan Curtis. The SMP Group is currently led by Liam Woollorton at Canterbury District Council. A change in policy at this location would not in itself attract funding for defences and the challenge of economic justification noted above should be considered.

Since 2018, the Environment Agency has been working with Coastal Groups and SMP Groups to undertake a “refresh” of the SMPs around England to ensure they remain fit for purpose. This is not a complete review. The initial findings of this work suggested that nationally it would not be possible or economically viable to implement the preferred policies. In this particular location, the project highlighted the risk to an array of caravan parks and properties near Eastchurch. It highlighted that the long-standing requirement for adaptation planning in this area had not been taken forward. Adaptation planning has been implemented in other areas around the country, which may help to inform options for this location. The locally designated Coastal Change Management Area may also help to guide decisions on things like property relocation or roll-back.

It is also worth noting that there is basic assistance offered in the form of the Coastal Erosion Assistance Grant for the demolition of properties at imminent risk from erosion. More details of this can be supplied if required.

The issue with the National Coastal Footpath is for the consideration of Natural England. We note, however, that the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 does include provision for stretches of coastline which are subject to erosion.

To go into more detail on the change process, the South East Coastal Group (SECG) is an integral part of an approval process for any changes to SMP policies. Overall, the responsibility of the SECG is to ensure that any changes to the SMP are consistent with the change Framework, reflect the often complex and different pressures on the coast, are legal and to be aware of any precedents that a change may create.

Specifically, the SECG needs to:

- Agree the policy changes to be contained within the SMP.
- Seek ratification of SMP policies within SECG organisations.

This change process covers the main elements of the SMP itself and the SMP Action Plan only where it would constitute a change to the overall plan and its management options. It does not cover normal updates to the Action Plan which do not change the SMP context or any of the detailed findings.

The reasons to update an SMP policy are:

- Significant new research or evidence on parameters that informed the decisions taken whilst developing the SMP.
- Significant changes in Government policy, such as on spatial planning and adaptation since the SMP was approved.
- Significant new evidence arising from further investigation into local options, such as from a Strategy Plan or scheme feasibility study.
- A severe event has made an element of the existing SMP policy or action plan untenable.
- Textual corrections or clarification of meaning required since SMP approval.

- Organisational change amongst those involved in SMP development that may affect SMP implementation.
- A need to update or amend programmes of work following work progressed. This does not mean that the SMP, or something about the way it was developed, was wrong. It is designed to improve future outcomes.

The change process involves a Steering Group, which includes the following organisations, which would all have to agree the proposed change to a policy:

- **Canterbury City Council** (the SMP lead authority) and Swale Borough Council, who have coast protection responsibilities. Canterbury City Council is responsible for the administration of updates for this SMP.
- **The Environment Agency**, which is responsible for managing sea flooding and has the strategic overview for managing all forms of flooding and erosion.
- **Natural England**, which has statutory responsibilities on environmental matters.
- **English Heritage**, which has statutory responsibilities for monuments and historical sites.
- **Kent County Council** in their capacity as Lead Local Flood Authority and with responsibility for supporting the SMP and its delivery. In addition, others are invited to attend for their technical expertise, or if they are lead organisations for specific actions.

Any proposed major changes to SMP policy must include community and stakeholder consultation prior to being submitted for approval by local authority cabinet, submission to the Southern Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (SRFCC) and final approval by the Environment Agency. The type and extent of consultation will vary depending on the location and the nature of change. Details of the consultation and its results will be included, however, in any report for cabinet approval. The consultation will typically be targeted at the wider public, including individuals, community or interest groups and impacted parish councils. Changes identified as moderate changes may also require wider community consultation.

Any substantive changes to the SMP or outcomes from the action plan will need to be approved by Swale Borough Council Cabinet and Kent County Council Cabinet. The SRFCC are responsible for 'reviewing and endorsing' SMPs and agreeing the programme and funding for flood and coastal risk management works. Amended SMPs must be submitted for approval to the Committee once the change has been made. To ensure independent scrutiny and local consultation, the Environment Agency will then approve changes to the SMP once the SRFCC has given its approval.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Hill  
Ministerial Contact Unit